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# Young Minds in Action: exploring the use of drama role play for citizenship education

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**Linda-Jane Simpson**

## **Abstract**

Drama as a learning medium is readily accessible to young children and it recognises the multi-faceted nature of children's expression through verbal and non-verbal means. This paper reports on key findings from a small-scale study which examined the use of drama role play in early years settings. It explores how drama role play can help temporarily suspend the traditional power dynamic between adults and children, and the implications this has for implementing citizenship education in the early years. On gender, it considers how the use of drama role play may encourage more assertive role play in young girls.

## **The Applied Educational Research Scheme**

The case study was supported by the Applied Educational Research Scheme, School Management and Governance Network. (For more information see: [www.aers.org.uk](http://www.aers.org.uk)). The purpose of this scheme is to enhance and co-ordinate educational research across Scotland. The research and its findings are intended for policy makers, teacher educators and academics, teachers, drama practitioners and nursery staff. The findings are being presented at AERS dissemination events, at national and international conferences, and published in professional and academic journals.

## **Introduction**

‘Allow us to tell you what we are thinking or feeling ... listen to us and hear what we say.’

U.N. Rights of the Child – No 13

(Unicef 2000)

The respectful ideals of listening, expressing and responding, embodied in this basic entreaty are fundamental to the creation of responsible citizens. Encouraging ‘active participation’ and ‘responsible citizenship’ in pupils is central to a number of recent Scottish policy initiatives (LTS Paper ‘Education for Citizenship’ 2002; A Curriculum for Excellence ACfE 2004) and are key concepts that inform the development of citizenship education in Scotland and elsewhere. Teachers are encouraged to involve young people aged 3-18 in creative active learning, in order to

‘... develop their capacities as successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors.’

Skills for citizenship require a combination of thought, emotion and communication, that are in essence an ability to listen and to respond to other human beings. ACfE uses drama and the expressive arts to give children

‘... ways of expressing responses to personal and social issues, to help young people to question and develop stances and views.’

Nichols (2007) identifies this means of expression as a recurrent feature of Social Participation programs in Australia –

‘... strategies should enable children to express their particular standpoints, and recognize the diversity of children’s situations and interests.’

In the early years however, facilitating participation and promoting citizenship presents some real challenges. Young children’s capacity for understanding is often underestimated on the grounds of their innocence and vulnerability, as well as their developmental immaturity (Burman 1994). Building the Curriculum 2 states for Scottish early years practitioners that young children develop as responsible citizens

‘...through encountering different ways of seeing the world, learning to share and give and take, learning to respect themselves and others, and taking part in making decisions’

(Scottish Executive 2007, p.9)

Neale defines citizenship for young children as an entitlement to recognition, respect and participation (Willow et al., 2004). The recognition of children as ‘...

social citizens in their own right [in the present] rather than future citizens in waiting' (Nichols 2007), would require a significant shift in the attitude of some early years staff. It is often the low expectations these key adults have of young children's capacity for social agency, that is an obstacle to greater participation in decision making.

A predominance of linear hierarchical models in the areas of literacy development, socialisation and participation (e.g. Hart's Ladder of Participation 1992), has contributed to an underestimation of children's abilities. Children are seen to proceed through identifiable, fixed set stages. With such structured theories of child development, childhood becomes merely a preparation for something better and appears to ignore the citizenship related qualities and skills which children deploy in the present moment. Instead much of early years practice views children as apprentices preparing for the citizenship of adulthood.

Constructivist and interpretative theorists suggest that children's development as social beings is a collective, public process, influenced by peers as much as by adults. Research evidence shows that young children already possess a competency and understanding that is worthy of notice and respect (Gandini et al 2005; Rogoff 1990; Nichols 2007). There are clear indications that where developmentally appropriate means are used to enable children to make outward expression of their ideas, then their views can make a perceptive and significant contribution.

School is therefore a particular area where young children need to be conceptualized as competent 'social actors' who are able to:

- Construct their everyday worlds;
- Participate in social processes;
- Constitute multiple voices rather than a collective and undifferentiated class.

It is important that they are allowed the means to shape and share their own developmental experiences, through participative citizenship in the present.

The work done in a time-based art such as drama, exists only in the here and now. So in role play teachers know to take and use whatever each child's response is in any given moment. Working imaginatively with young children, one develops an ability to adapt in the moment to whatever choices the children make, and to respect and use those ideas.

The story, as the metaphor for the outside world with real people, is a safe place for the children and the adult to role play together, able to be 'both observers and participants, both passive and active, and where the imagined becomes the real and direct experience'. (Simpson, 2006, p.17).

Accepting and responding to each other (the real self), while all the time we are being someone else (the pretend self), is a sophisticated cognitive process which

young children readily and willingly engage in, when they trust the adult. Great insight and empathy can be observed emerging out of the depth of that interaction and sharing.

## **Aims and Methodology**

The study had three key aims:

- To explore the potential of experiential drama role play as a creative approach to citizenship education, in nursery settings.
- To compare and contrast children's active participation in sessions of drama role play, with adult-led story telling activity times.
- To identify any aspects of the teacher's approach that may influence children's levels of participation.

In order to access parents from contrasting socio-economic circumstances two different nurseries were included in this study; one in a city location and the other in a semi-rural area. The research sought to explore the following research questions:-

1. How do children respond to two contrasting models of learning; a didactic, transmission model (story telling) and an active, constructivist approach (drama and role play)?
2. What implications do these models have for young children's learning about citizenship and for the teaching of this subject?

The researcher carefully selected themed stories to be used with four groups of 3-5 year old children. These storylines were chosen because they portrayed a positive citizenship message and role model. The stories provided the opportunity for younger children to reflect on everyday interactions and social scenarios. Here issues included sharing, being listened to, understanding another person's point of view, and caring for the environment. Two different groups of children in each nursery explored the same storyline, using different techniques: drama role play and the more traditional adult-led story telling.

All the research with these young children adhered to the established ethical guidelines. Special attention was given to gaining written parental consent for the videoing of the children. The consent information explained the purpose of the research, and how the information gathered was to be used. Formal approval for conducting this research was granted by the University of Edinburgh, Ethics Committee. The support of the respective Head Teachers and the co-operation of the Nursery staff, was also agreed at the start of the project.

The researcher led the activities with each of the groups, and all the children were invited to respond to the story, and to express their understanding of the characters' feelings and predicaments. While the two drama groups were directly engaged by being 'in role' as the actual characters, the two storytelling groups were seated throughout and encouraged to retell the story verbally, after answering some questions about the events.

In order to capture both the verbal and non-verbal interactions of the young children, each group activity was videoed and was analysed by developing a framework of 'critical moments' in the action. The meaning of this term is explained within stage three of the analysis section which follows.

## **Analysis of the Data**

In order to access the evidence from the video tapes I devised a six step process. This allowed me to pinpoint, in relation to the research questions, which were the significant sessions, and the exact times within those, that were worthy of further examination.

### **The six stage analysis process**

#### **1. Post session review**

Immediately following the sessions I reflected with my assistant the camera operator, and noted areas when there was a difference in the level of the children's interest, engagement and participation. This was a first indicator that something of potential significance had occurred.

#### **2. Written Overview**

Exact timings and key events were noted in the progression of activities for both groups. A single line quotation of speech sometimes appeared as an added point of reference.

#### **3. Applying the list of criteria to identify 'critical moments'**

There was a need to identify exact features in the children's behaviour that indicated when they were absorbed; when they were losing interest; and when there was a variation in their reactions. I compiled a checklist of verbal and non-verbal signs (e.g. direct and sustained eye contact, sitting still, listening intently, emotional engagement on face, taps feet, talks to neighbour, etc.) which I referred to when I watched the extracts of footage. The purpose of this list was twofold – to help increase my viewing efficiency, and to also standardize the way I watched the twenty tapes. It was vital that I tried to look at the videos of both groups from both settings in the same way.

The application of these criteria during close watching of the video material helped me to pinpoint what I have termed 'critical moments' of participation. A working



definition of this term would be times of heightened response on the part of a child or group of children.

#### 4. Transcription of the speech

Having identified the 'hot spots' of involvement, a detailed written record was made of the speech during specific time frames already identified at stage two. This record uncovered further layers of detail undetected at earlier stages in this evaluation process.

#### 5. Still Images from the video

While the transcription made clear what was said, I was grateful for the camera technology that enabled me to make frozen images of the action. The stills gave me a moment-by-moment view that allowed me to scrutinise the 'critical moments' footage much more closely. In this way I was able to see hand gestures, facial expressions, movements and eye focus - all the revealing, non-verbal ways that young children express themselves.

#### 6. Feedback on the 'critical moments' data

Rather than show two minute clips of video when presenting the 'critical moments' evidence to any audience, I separated the visuals from the verbals. Ideally, I needed viewers to access right away some of the minute detail of the gestures and the speech. So I shared first significant still images, along with my own verbal account of events. I then provided a second opportunity to view the same frozen moment's action, this time accompanied by an audio tape of the spoken interaction.

The stages in the above process deepened my ability to identify and understand exactly what was occurring through the interaction in the drama. What emerged was a picture of children in the drama group initiating and directing the action in response to the different ways the teacher used role, tone of voice and facial expression.

## **Key findings**

We do not create responsible citizens by just having children read books. By its very nature citizenship is something you do and live with your body, mind and heart. One might therefore expect drama's physically active and experiential approach of using teacher-guided role play, to be well matched to this prioritized area of the national curriculum. Teaching and learning is always a combination of what the teacher plans and what the children bring by way of prior knowledge and individual responses. A closer examination of the data evidence carried out particularly in stages four and five of the analysis process, revealed teacher and child behaviours which either facilitated or placed limits on the possibility of 'critical moments' happening. The key findings each emerge from that basic observation.

## Limits on participation

Storytelling as a means of demonstrating positive examples of citizenship to young children, has significant counter effects. By its very nature it contains children and limits their opportunities to be actively and physically engaged, which is exactly why it is used in preference to drama. The sitting down required by some forms of storytelling mirrors the 'strictures' Nichols identifies and which govern conduct 'on the mat' in many early years classrooms. For the times of story reading '... children learned the 'five Ls': lips locked, legs crossed, hands in laps and looking at the teacher' (Nichols 2007 p.123). Denied opportunities for active role play, boys are particularly disadvantaged (Holland 2003). Kinesthetic learners of either sex cannot access the expression of thoughts and feelings through their bodies.

The eye contact between child and teacher seen on the video tape, indicates children who are listening well and on task despite the restrictions. Interestingly, the camera also captured several instances of boys finding ways into more physical expressive participation. Facial expression is one of the mediums of drama, and this has led me to term what I observe as 'sitting down role play'. Several boys can be seen mirroring the expressions of the unkind children in one story ('Where did you go Joe?'), and the expressions of 'Selfish Sophie', when she is cross with her Dad, in the story of that name.

IMAGE 1 (4 children seated – facial expressions)

## Teacher and child behaviours

The analysis of the video evidence highlights certain teacher behaviours which appeared to facilitate a heightened level of child participation in the drama.

Each behaviour is worthy of individual consideration, after being listed here:

1. The use of a responsive and flexible teaching approach;
2. The adoption of an encouraging tone of voice;
3. The maintenance of the teacher's lower status role in the face of challenges from the children in a superior role;
4. The fascination with negative role models.

### 1. A responsive and flexible teaching approach

The moments of interesting child participation were also times when I adapted my role in response to what roles the children chose to play. I was also alert to any imbalance in numbers. When seven children were collectively in role as Joe, I assumed a role alongside the two boys who had chosen to be the unkind characters in the story.

Children were allowed to determine the level of their participation, and given the freedom to dip in and out. Video footage reveals a boy and a girl being assertive at one stage and then being non-participatory observers at another.

IMAGE 2 (4 children and Teacher lying down, 2 children seated)

Eye contact shows they are engaged, they watch and listen, but are otherwise silent. Unlike the others they choose to remain out of role. What we may be seeing here is children being allowed to regulate their participation themselves. They took time out to watch, think and assimilate while the rest of us were lying on our backs cloud watching.

From a place in the centre of the drama I tread 'softly softly', as I plant the seeds of ideas to prompt them and then wait to see what the children will do.

2. Adoption of an encouraging tone of voice

Close listening to the soundtrack of my spoken interaction with the children reveals several different tones of voice. The responses of the children in reply indicate their understanding and an ability to interpret the meaning that the tones carry.

A different sounding adopted voice, is for the children the crucial indicator along with a physical sign (e.g. bag, hat, shawl, glasses) that the teacher is speaking as if they are someone else. The drama group children in one of the settings went beyond the need for the external signs.

Two tones are worthy of mention here. In direct contrast to the 'teacher in charge' voice, necessary at some points, I deploy the voice of someone who is unclear and feigning puzzlement. In the face of their teacher's apparent confusion, some children are very willing to explain it. On the tape I say 'what is it? ... Tell me again then.' I also begin sentences in which I pause and trail off – 'When I come back again, I'll be that ...' thereby encouraging the children to complete them.

This allows individuals or groups the opportunity to assume greater power of control and direction. It is also an indicator of their confidence, and the degree to which they have inferred, deduced and generally comprehended the situation and the action it requires.

In the video I can also be heard to use encouraging noises and words - 'Mmmm', 'Yes', 'Uh-Huh', 'I've told you'. These indicate to the children that I am listening and responding, but crucially not as the teacher 'in the driving seat' but as a fellow passenger in one of the seats of the bus. If at any point in the drama, children have taken the initiative in any way, then I am at pains not to say anything too leading or too definite, that could dominate, instead of encourage their expression.

3. Maintaining teacher's lower status role in the face of challenges from the children in a superior role

In the interests of greater child participation I can be seen assuming a lesser status role or even a negative role model character. For the children to be able to exert their voice I must hold my nerve and stay true to the lesser role.

One boy Alastair, in role as Joe points and says very loudly and deliberately to the

three of us 'bullies':

'NOW STOP THAT! Why do you say that?'

After that, two of the other 'Joes' look closely at me, as if reading my reaction. I sanction continued opposition to me by remaining true to my original chosen role. The fact I do not grab back my authority as teacher sends out very clear signals to the children. The mild protest I do utter to Alastair - 'Just a minute I told you ...' receives an even more forceful:

'NOW BE QUIET!'

back from him, accompanied by a determined pointed finger that is turned directly on me, this time without the slightest hesitation.

IMAGE 3 (group with boy pointing at Teacher)

Interestingly, out of role, in the reflection which followed this exchange, it was Malcolm who had been more concerned with watching my face for clues to gauge my response, who 'talked up' his own part in turning the bullies away.

'Em' I said 'Shut up' because I didn't want him to say anymore. He's big!'

Alastair, the boy who actually put me in my place, gets more caught up in his own excitement as he realises just what he has done. He gestures furiously and talks over the others.

#### 4. The fascination with negative role models

Noted in the evidence from both settings, was a certain fascination with the characters displaying more negative citizenship behaviours.

'We're going to be the nasties now!' There was obviously a certain thrill to being the naughty ones especially when the role play activity justified it, and the teacher sanctioned it. Pretending to be bad may have appeared exciting because it broke the norm of always doing what is expected of you. When it comes to citizenship the children often give you the answers they think you expect. I only had to mention Selfish Sophie and many of them quickly told me 'I share ...' 'We share.' They know what you want to hear, so it tripped off their tongues.

### **Gender and peer relationships**

Penny Holland's research found that early years staff tended to praise girls for their compliant behaviour.

'[When] ... active play scenarios are sanitized out of our early years settings, with the message that these are only negatively associated

with boys, we are preventing girls from understanding that resistance is an option and boys from understanding that girls can be active and resistant’.

(Holland, 2003, p.27)

It was all the more interesting to see expression in role from girls in both settings, that did not fit this accepted model.

For some staff, Alison might have been labelled a ‘little madam’ (Holland 2003), in the way she took control and directed me. Pointing at me, she gave me a series of directions.

‘No one’s ready yet ... We haven’t been the trees yet ... You have to go back in ... We have to stand up and put our arms out like that, like a tree ... STOP ... Stop it .... We’re going to be the nasties.’

In the same group, Kara, a quieter child, followed Alison’s assertive lead. When I was in role as the thoughtless child pulling at the trees, she answered as one of those trees and in a vicious whisper said ‘STOP IT!’

Penny needed no coaching in the role of one of the unkind children. In the Joe story she caught the right tone of voice, the facial expression and the body language of the ‘bully’. This is where giving children the freedom to interpret the role can be a risky business. However, in response, Matthew in role as one of the Joes, tapped into a prior observation of superhero behaviour. Faced with Penny as the bully he used a tactic of stoic and silent resistance, raising his gaze to the ceiling in an impassive but tight expression.

IMAGE 4 (boy in red looking at ceiling)

Once the ‘bully’ had gone, he triumphantly announced ‘I’ve still got my smile... I am a superhero.’ The broad smile on his face indicates his pride in himself for winning through in this way.

IMAGE 5 (boy in red smiling broadly)

In the other setting it was interesting to note the differences in strategies used by the boys and the girls. In the pointed finger moment, described before, the boy in role used a direct physical and verbal rebuff. Rosemary managed to find her voice ‘I’m going to tell my Mum on you’, which she repeats. She was the only girl who was able to produce a verbal response. It was interesting that it required an adult for back up support. In the reflection at the end, you can just manage to hear her mention what she said in between the boys’ exclamations of self praise.

## **Conclusion**

This study, using established pedagogical techniques found that drama role play had distinct advantages with regard to young children. First, it was found to help promote young children's participation and second it highlighted the mutable and fluid nature of their contribution

Young children may understand the reality of being a citizen in their real world if they have explored the possibilities through imaginary situations with their teacher. 'To capture the meaning of a moment is what the play is for.' (Wagner, 1979, p.19). This calls for practitioners able to change roles and to put aside the accepted norms of adult authority, and willing to work from the centre of the role play. Such learning through drama can allow the children to feel what it is like to exert their authority and express their views as competent citizens now. It can also give young learners permission to 'play' with being a negative citizen for a time, to better understand the reasons for positive citizenship. Are parents and teachers ready for what this means – empowered young citizens contributing and participating in the here and now, in this lifelong learning process called citizenship?

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